

Squatters occupy office block at centre of Downton star's protest

Matt Watts

SQUATTERS have taken over a former council building which Downton Abbey star Jim Carter is fighting to stop being turned into homes.

Activists moved into Camden council's derelict housing and social services offices opposite West Hampstead train station last Saturday. They want to turn the five-storey building, which has

been empty for three years, into "London's biggest community centre".

Carter, who plays Butler Carson in the ITV drama, is leading the Save West Hampstead Stop the Blocks! campaign against A2 Dominion's scheme for 163 homes and wants to return the 25,000 sq ft building to community use.

The squatters' group, Camden Mothership, has approached council bosses to apply for a lease to stay in the build-

ing. They are using computers, printers, photocopiers and phones left by the council to prepare the campaign.

A second-floor office has been turned into a community meeting room and there are plans for a recording studio, multimedia centre and internet cafe.

Veteran housing and environmental campaigner Phoenix, who is leading the group, said a maximum of 20 people would be allowed to live on the site.

He said: "We are in here as a protest against closing a housing office during a housing crisis. But people do not want this to become a mass squat. Community facilities are being shut down and this is an incredible space that can help provide them."

"It can be a model for what we should be doing with empty buildings in London. It can be London's biggest community centre and all self-funded. It would also save the council thousands of pounds a week on paying for security guards while being an amazing community resource. We are hopeful Camden will get on board."

However, Theo Blackwell, Camden council's finance chief, said the group was "naïve and misguided".

He said: "They want to talk about housing, but this is a development that would provide much needed housing, half of it affordable, that will benefit the community immensely. They are harming the chance of that housing



being provided. They came to us asking for a 'meanwhile use' of the building, which we were willing to consider before we learned they had

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Tycoon's £20m house is most expensive to go on sale online

Jonathan Prynn
Consumer Business Editor

A NINE-bedroom house in Kensington with a price tag of £20 million has become the most expensive property in Britain to be marketed by an online estate agency.

The owner, who has lived in the property since 1980, will pay a flat fee of £899 to the SellMyHome.co.uk agency. If he sold it through a conventional estate agent – which would charge a fee of 1.5 to three per cent, plus VAT – he would face a bill of between £359,100 and £718,200.

The owner, 69, a multi-millionaire hedge fund and property magnate who has decided to leave London, has also said that the stamp duty bill of more than £2million is included in the asking price of £19.95 million. He will also handle most of the viewings on the Phillimore Gardens house because this is not included in the fee.

He paid £375,000 for the upper storeys of the house in 1980 before buying the basement a few years later. It was gutted and refurbished in 2001. The townhouse, which was built in 1860 and has seven bathrooms, was on the market with a conventional



Profit: the vendor bought part of the Kensington house for £375,000 in 1980

estate agent last year at £15 million. The industry is expected to view the sale with interest because online agents have not been able to get a toehold in the upper echelons of the market.

SellMyHome.co.uk, led by former Knight Frank agent Will Clark, was instructed to sell a £15.5 million house on Hans Place in Knightsbridge last year, but the deal fell through because of new higher stamp duty rates.

Mr Clark said: "Online estate agency can work at all levels of the market. This property is likely to attract interest from around the globe due to its

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Sit-in: the Camden Mothership group, left, including Tom, above, are using old phones, above left, in a campaign to save the offices, top. Jim Carter, far left, opposes the building's redevelopment

refused to do so and allowed this building to stand empty for years is a hideously wasteful approach."

The squatters argue that they should be allowed to put the offices into use because no development is expected until at least 2017, as builders' merchants Travis Perkins has a lease on part of the site until December 2016.

The council is finalising the sale of the land to A2 Dominion, which is expected to submit a planning application in the new year.

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would be happy to meet the squatters and discuss their plans.

He said: "This is a public building on public land and should absolutely be used to provide services to the community. The fact that the council has

already occupied the building. We will not negotiate with squatters and have spoken to our lawyers and are willing to take legal action to evict them."

A spokesman for the Save West Hampstead campaign said its members

